Denali

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

The Questions We Ask: A Tetraptych

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Writer-in-Residence 2012

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We humans have never called Denali home: it has been a park for nearly a hundred years, and before that had no permanent settlements, save a few archaeological hunting camp sites shared with ancient wolf dens. Yet we are drawn to it. Each year hundreds of thousands of us travel long distances just to spend a few days in it. We are fed by it, our lives made more meaningful. In these four interlinked essays, named for the places where the events occurred, I explore some aspects of this rich vein of human experience in the park. It's been said that all writing throughout human history has endeavored to answer just one question: how shall we live? In my experience, the answer to that question is found in the natural world. It is an open book; we need only slip into wilderness time. These mountains, glaciers, valleys and rivers, these wolves, bears and marmots, these blueberries, gentians and willows all teem with answers. Every moment, they provide lessons in how to live a satisfying, grateful, and honorable life. And this is why, I think, we are drawn to the grand and invaluable wilderness of Denali National Park and Preserve.

Tattler Creek

"There's such incredible stories in these rocks," he says, arms spread wide.

We hike quickly up Tattler Creek, hopping back and forth across threads of clearwater, through willow and over a tundra-blanketed bench, as Tony Fiorillo tells me how it came to be that he is here, climbing Denali's mountains in search of dinosaur fossils. It took years to convince the National Park Service to let him search this wilderness; it took someone finding the first print. A professor was in the park with two graduate students, explaining Dr. Fiorillo's theory that dinosaur fossils might be found in the dark sedimentary rock near where they stood at the base of Igloo Mountain.

"Like this one?" said one of the students, pointing to a boulder, just feet from the park road. She had found the first dinosaur print in Denali National Park.

Tony and three others were soon carefully extricating the footprint to bring to Park Headquarters, where it's now displayed at the Murie Science and

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Selected competitively through an open call for entries each year, artists spend ten days in Denali. From their experiences, they each create art pieces to donate to the park collection. Opinions expressed may not be shared by the National Park Service.

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Learning Center. Bent over their work, they noticed a busload of visitors stopped on the road next to them. At first they assumed the driver wanted to show these visitors the archaeologists extracting the park's first dinosaur print. Then one of the four noticed, just on the other side of Igloo Creek, lying down as relaxed as the family dog and watching them intently, a wolf. The bus had stopped to see the wolf, and the wolf had stopped to watch the archaeologists.

We climb upvalley, leaving willow thickets behind. The rock changes from the reddish volcanic of the Upper Cantwell formation to the slate-colored sedimentary of the Lower Cantwell, formed from an ancient river system of the late Cretaceous. This dark older rock, Tony tells me, is where fossils are found. I point to a line of rocks jutting out like fins running up the mountainside.

"Is that the kind of place you look?" I ask.

Seconds later, Tony's colleague from Japan, Yoshi, points to a footprint, and Tony picks up part of a fossilized tree trunk. It's a hidden world from deep time here, when these black mountains were plains of mud and stream and lush vegetation, and twenty-five-foot dinosaurs roamed them.

"This is the most exciting place to work," says Tony. These prints reveal the lives of high-latitude dinosaurs; they help prove that dinosaurs migrated across the Bering Land Bridge, that Asian and North American dinosaurs were related.

We stop at a Y in the stream and a field of tent-sized boulders. Tony points out print after print in the boulder field, from several different dinosaurs, including the three-toed duck-billed hadrosaur and the pachyrhinosaurus, a cousin of the triceratops with a knobby face that, says Tony, "only a mother could love." We climb up further and, on a slab of dark rock surrounded by scree, he shows me the dance floor. It's upside down, a result of the crumpling, grinding, and uplifting of shifting tectonic plates, and it reveals at least a dozen prints of dinosaurs all together—a place where dinosaurs gathered to feed. Tony invented the term "dancefloor" to connote a place with many prints on one intact rock face, the term itself borrowed from the floor of a Fred Astaire dance studio, where tape outlines help new dancers find their way.

And Tony discovered another dancefloor in Denali, one with thousands of fossil prints from sediments so fine that even skin impressions are preserved, as well as traces of crayfish and other invertebrates, the body hop impressions of crickets, fish fins, and even the probe marks of shorebird bills and ripples of waves at shoreline.

Tony, Yoshi, and Yoshi's student Tomo head further upstream to a newly discovered print from a four-toed theradinosaur that may be an omnivorous cousin of the carnivorous therapods. I stay in the boulder field to see if I can relocate the prints. It's surprisingly difficult, as if they slipped back beneath the muds of time. Then I meander downstream, thinking about the mysteries still contained within this vast and beautiful wilderness. All these dinosaur prints, 65 to 80 million years old, were left unseen until 2005, a mere seven years ago.

Driving by this unassuming creek opposite Cathedral Mountain, it's impossible to guess what treasures lie upstream. I've been to Denali dozens of

times over nearly thirty years, but am still learning—will always be learning—what this place holds, for it is rich and diverse, and slow to show its treasures. This is wilderness time. Different from our clock time, the wilderness follows its own ticking, and reveals its secrets to those who are patient, and persevere. In these wild mountains is a lesson for us: as much as we think we know, with all our years of science and experience, it's just a drop in the bucket to what is held here.

Sable Pass

> *Place is the first of all beings, since everything that exists is in a place and cannot exist without a place. ~Archytas*

Nearly ten at night, I stop at Sable Pass to watch a caribou feeding near the road. He trots beside me, then halts, startled by a truck roaring up the hill. The truck stops, the caribou crosses into willow, and I'm just about to move on when I see them, the sow's blond fur shimmering, the two cubs clustered near her thick legs. Midway down a mountainside in a field punctuated by willows, the grizzlies are eating late summer's bounties of bear flowers and berries. So intent is the sow on eating that, though I watch for nearly an hour, not once does she lift her broad head. The cubs are sometimes focused on eating and sometimes more interested in other things–scudding clouds in the darkening sky, a tangle of willow, the butterfly that flushes before them. Their mother begins to dig, powerful shoulders working, chunks of tundra tossed skyward. The cubs scamper over, a playful rocking-horse gait. The lighter-colored one, blond like his mother, joins in the digging; the darker one approaches, then emits a few high-pitched grunts, like a baby's squeal of surprise, and bounds back.

The cub's cries flow downhill to where I sit, the only sounds in the cool evening air, and stir within me a memory of an early July day when I saw another sow and cub, just down this hill in an interlinked series of tundra ponds. My husband, son, and I watched them feed on sweet summer grasses, then amble downhill, across the road, through willow and into a pond. We watched as they plunged their heads underwater, as the cub pulled up a plant and swung it around, back and forth, like a baby with a rag doll. Watched as they climbed out of the water, the cub splashing and loping. Watched as the cub ran and jumped on the sow,who rolled over onto her back, gigantic paws and long black claws limp in the summer air, rolling and hugging and wrestling but so carefully not hurting her cub, who was all-out playing, hard and tumbly.

I saw these bears more than a decade ago, but haven't remembered them at all until this moment. This happens every time I come to Denali: I see a certain rise of a hill, or slip of a stream, and recall something experienced there, something I had forgotten until the place itself revealed memory to me. Then I remember with a precision that makes me wonder about time and memory, about the inner workings of my brain and the outer workings of place. Climbing the hill toward Polychrome, I recalled stopping there one late September day to watch four

wolves, two of them black, trot down the braided East Fork River, the first wild wolves that my son, then eight years old, had ever seen. Winding up Stony Dome on a hot sunny day, I remembered a caribou high on the ridge, silhouetted against a robin's egg blue sky, shaking its great antlered head against an onslaught of insects, as I climbed the slope with friends. Struck by how memory is tied to place, I realize my memory isn't stored entirely within me, but resides in place, too, in some space or energy between.

The Native Athabaskans who once traveled Denali to collect berries or hunt caribou had their own place names. They called Caribou Creek "Gal Neelekh No':" the creek which king salmon swim to. Baker Creek was "Noch' elt lek No':" game leaps across creek. And "Khotolnodenh," where water surges up, is their name for Toklat Springs, a legendary place where there was always open water, where they could find food during very cold winters. These names signified what happened here, and helped hold memory in place.

I leave the bear family to their late-night grazing and continue up the hill, but at the crest I stop again for another sight burned in memory, both rare and familiar: rising over the top of the now-dark mountains, still bathed in sunlight, white that isn't cloud but sharp angles and glimmering ice, the top of Mount McKinley, Denali, the Great One.

Stony Dome

She stood looking at us, this group of six people on the spongy tundra, close enough to fill the frame of my binoculars. Cinnamon face, soft brown coat glinting in midday sun, she was hot; her tongue hung long and narrow, her mouth opened in a wide smile, and her ears pulled toward each other and back. We stood still, barely breathing, my beating heart the only sound I heard. I didn't reach for my camera: like an apparition, she might have vanished into blue sky.

On this discovery hike near Stony Dome in late July, our ranger, Dianne, told us that this wolf was one of the Grant Creek wolves, a family group that had been seen frequently in the park for many years. Busloads of visitors have watched these wolves chase caribou, lead pups across the road, set off for a hunt with a chorus of howls. But Grant Creek suffered such losses in spring that sightings were way down and the remaining members were scattered and rarely seen. I knew this story, carried it with me like a lead weight.

I carry it a week later as I peer into an empty wolf den above the East Fork River. Hands and knees on powdery loam, I peer into the ten-inch-wide hole tunneling back into the grassy bank, into darkness, but find only two faint prints and one tuft of fur, pale gray and light as air. The summer before, the Grant Creek wolves raised pups here. The female who was trapped this spring nursed them here.

I climb above the den and sit with Tom Meier, the park's wolf biologist, as a steady wind blows and sunlight slips in and out of clouds. We talk about the

Grant Creek and East Fork wolf groups, the most viewed and longest lived lineage in all of Denali National Park. They are direct descendants of the same wolf family Adolph Murie studied seventy years ago, watching them from the bluff across from us, the same wolf groups Gordon Haber studied for forty-three years. When they denned here last summer, it was the first recorded use in decades. This thrilled those who followed Denali's famous wolf packs, but it only lasted one year.

In April, after mating and before pupping, the Grant Creek alpha female was trapped at the park's northeastern boundary—right where the state had just removed a buffer that had prohibited wolf hunting and trapping. She likely carried the year's pups, for though they were seen at this den in May, the remaining members have since scattered. Wolves exist in community, everything done as one, a rhythm to their seasons, nomadic in winter and den-centered in summer. Without pups to cooperatively raise, without an alpha female, the Grant Creek family group has fragmented. According to Tom and all the bus drivers and park rangers I've asked, no one has seen any Grant Creek pups. Throughout the park, wolf sightings have dropped by seventy percent. It will be years, if ever, for that to rise, for eastern Denali wolves to recover. Generations, intact, are required for the intricacies of cooperative society to evolve.

In previous years, Grant Creek wolves were the ones visitors saw. The summer before, a bus driver and her passengers watched the wolves prepare for a hunt, the way they have for millenia here in Denali. The adults began gathering and chorus howling right next to the road. On their heels were the pups, wanting to join in but reprimanded to stay with one adult, their pup-sitter. As the hunters trotted off single file across tundra, the pups sat in the middle of the road, whining and howling, gray-fuzz heads turned intently toward the departing line.

For my residency, I'd been most excited about staying at the East Fork cabin while the wolves denned just upriver. Perhaps, like one former resident, I'd be awakened in the mornings to wolves howling after returning from a night's hunt with food for the pups. Or perhaps, like another, I'd look out the window to see a yearling wolf on the porch, wrestling with the broom. Instead, the wolves were nowhere to be seen or heard, and I was bereft over all that one trapper had taken from this renowned family of wolves, from me and from everyone else visiting the park.

High on the the bench in an open field, Tom points to a dead wolf, the older Grant Creek female who also died in spring, but of natural causes. Nature is swift to reclaim her own: only a few months dead, she is already no more than skin and bones, tufts of white fur scattered around her. Most wolves turn white with age, says Tom; rarely is one born white.

Years before, one young white wolf from the East Fork group was also killed just outside the park, by a sport hunter from the midwest. On a visit to that hunter's state, Tom saw the stuffed and mounted wolf, and told a friend he was glad, in a way, it had been preserved, so everyone could see what a gorgeous animal it was. His friend told him, no, he'd rather see it dead on the tundra, having

died of natural causes, rotting into the ground.

"Well," says Tom, "I guess I'd have to agree with him."

Nature gives answers in response to the kinds of questions we ask, wrote the poet Pattiann Rogers, and in this scientific age, the questions most asked are those that science can answer. But what other questions could we ask of nature? What else could these wolves tell us, if we let them be? What can community form, what relations to place? What shape does grief take in the physical world? What does love look like when it's shattered?

Standing at Stony Dome, I looked hard at the wolf through my binoculars, and wondered: was she too thin? Was she split from the pack, and having trouble finding food on her own? A lone wolf is a dead wolf, so the saying goes, and it is true, they cannot fare well alone for long. I scanned her body: were those ribs sticking through, or just sunlight playing on her brindled coat?

She resumed her slow trot across bearberry and dwarf birch, making a slow arc around us, then turned downhill toward the stream. As she entered willow thickets, in and out of my view, she sprinted, stopped, and pounced—all four feet off the ground, neck and head up, as if she was spring-loaded. Then the slow trot again, and she disappeared around a bend in the stream, into the narrow opening between two mountains that water had created.

East Fork

for Louise Murie, 1912-2012

I sit on the porch and think of her, sitting on this porch, as her husband perched upriver on the far ridge, waiting for pups to emerge or adults to arrive at the wolf den across the East Fork. Louise, having finished her morning chores around the one-room cabin, may have risen, begun walking down to the stream to fetch water, and been stopped, as I have been, by the sweet scent of northern bedstraw, by rows of equisetum shimmering in morning light, by river beauties nodding fuchsia faces over clear-running waters. Perhaps she wondered how the cinquefoil with its five petals was related to the rose; perhaps she wondered if gentian grew on other continents. So many blossoms at her feet; in one week here I have found over fifty different types. Louise began collecting plants, pressing roots, stems, leaves and flowers. She and Adolph packaged them off to those who helped identify them: a friend in Maine, a lichen specialist in Norway, a botanist in Sweden who later wrote the definitive book of Alaska flora. Louise Murie was among the first to begin identifying and classifying the plants of Denali National Park, just as her husband Adolph Murie was among the first to study the park's sheep and wolves and bears, the first to urge protection of the wolves. Pioneers, the Muries were, like these river beauties I now sit beside, watching the stream tug at their leaves. In the Cathedral Range I have seen these flowers pour down either side of steep-falling waters like a long, billowing scarf. At Wonder Lake they fringe lakeside; near Thoroughfare Pass they slip between rocks and willow. Their other common

name is fireweed, because they are the first flowering plant to colonize after fire. In this new landscape recently released from icefields, they are the first to succeed after ice; I've seen them cling to granite walls revealed by receding glaciers. Now I sit on the porch in evening light and watch their bobbing heads. In another few weeks, pink petals will fall, and pistils will swell, split, and send puffs of seed like starlight out into the air to settle where wind carries all pioneers: someplace new, undiscovered, and lit from within.

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